

# Claudius Bites Snake

Barbara Levick

Suetonius in his biography of the Emperor Claudius scornfully says that in one of twenty edicts issued on a single day by the Emperor during his censorship of 47-8 he proclaimed that there was nothing as effective against snakebite (*viperæ morsus*) as yew juice (*tsucus*, which might be liquid pressed from the berries, sap from stems, or the juice of crushed leaves).

Whatever the merits of the cure, it is to be hoped that Claudius prescribed some limit to the dose, because all parts of the yew, except the outer flesh of the fruit, are notoriously poisonous to animals and fatalities to human beings have occurred in modern times. The deadly properties of the alkaloids (taxin), which interfere with the action of the heart, were well known to the ancients: Pliny, a younger contemporary of Claudius, warns against picnicking near it, and connects the Greek and Roman name of the tree, *taxus*, with 'toxic' and with the Greek word for a bow and arrows, 'toxa'. In the following century the great doctor Galen also noticed its destructive properties (and in the fourth century the dangers of sleeping near it were repeated from an earlier writer by another medical man, Oribasius).

Did Claudius have any particular snake in mind, or was the remedy thought to be effective against any poisonous snake known to the Romans? The family of *colubridæ* are mainly non-venomous constrictors, though the Montpellier Snake (*Malpolon monspessulanus*) has been known to cause systematic envenoming. It is an active hunter, now found in Italy only in Liguria and the Po peninsula, as well as in Spain, France, and Greece. Members of the family of the *viperidæ* are what Claudius probably had in mind, as the word used in his edict suggests. There are four possibilities, not all equally deadly: the adder, *Vipera berus*, widespread in the Alps; the meadow viper, *V. ursinii*, only slightly poisonous, which occurs on the mountains of central Italy; the asp, *V. aspis*, the commonest poisonous snake, widespread all over Italy; and the sand viper, *V. ammodytes*, of north-east Italy, active mainly at night.

The Romans may not have distinguished all these types, but if they did, the implied wide distribution favours the asp, the implied virulence of the bite the sand viper. What is most likely to have drawn Claudius' attention to the matter is an incident involving a distinguished person or someone he knew.

## **Claudius dreads Druids**

Claudius' information probably came from one of his personal physicians – this passage is only one that shows how interested he was in medicine. His mother Antonia the Younger, who suffered from eye trouble and may also have had unusually severe problems in pregnancy and childbirth, kept an entourage of physicians, and Claudius himself was notoriously afflicted with poor health.

Ultimately, however, the remedy may have been a Gallic one, learned from herbalists either when Antonia was staying at Lugdunum (Lyon) while her husband was fighting in Germany, 12-9 B.C, or later, in A.D. 43, when Claudius returned to the province and city of his birth on his way to and from Britain. There were doctors in Claudius' suite during his six-months' absence from Rome for the conquest of Britain; one of them, Scribonius Largus, published a book of prescriptions. The yew (Old English *iw*, German *eibe*) was a sacred tree in Celtic Europe and left traces in place-names, as at Eboracum, the Roman name for York, and in the Portuguese city of Evora. And the Gauls were renowned for their skill with herbs.

It tells slightly against the idea of Claudius picking up this remedy in Gaul that his announcement of it came three or four years after his return from the north. That is explicable: there may have been no occasion for it before an incident in 47-8. More serious is Claudius' well-known view, implied in a speech, made to the Senate in 48, and recorded verbatim at Lyon, that well-off Gauls at any rate were fit to play a full part in senatorial government. He had a corresponding antipathy to native Druidical practices, which he banned outright. The fact is, however, that his banning of the rites is far from proof that he did not believe in their efficacy. For another sign of his distaste for Druidism also shows fear. A Roman knight from Vaison (Vasio) was pleading a case before the Emperor when he let slip a Druidical egg (thought to be a sovereign means of success at law!) from his toga. It fell at Claudius' feet, and his reaction was to have the man executed. Indignation at his flouting of the ban, perhaps; but fear too on the part of a timid Emperor at being jinxed by the Celt.

## **How does yew do?**

How effective was Claudius' dangerous remedy likely to be? The main effects of snake venoms is to cause local tissue destruction at the site of the bite, bleeding and shock (these are the most important life-threatening actions), kidney failure, and paralysis. Since yew depresses the circulatory system, it could slow down the progress of poison through the body, but it would not affect bleeding and shock. However, the remedy may have been supposed to act by stimulating vomiting (which occurs in yew poisoning) and so eliminating the venom. Since the actual mortality from the untreated bite of European vipers is less than 1%, any remedy would keep its reputation.

There are political aspects to Claudius' edict. First, he was showing concern, probably quite genuine, for the welfare of his subjects. Another edict of the twenty issued on one day urged them to caulk their casks well for a promising harvest (suggesting incidentally that the snake-bite remedy was offered towards the end of a hot summer: venomous snakes in Italy are most active during spring and in September). Second, if this was a Gallic remedy, the Romans of the first century may be seen looking further afield for knowledge and power, as they were doing for luxury (see the paper on luxurious toothpaste, **Omnibus**, 18). Some of the fruits of empire could be looted from Rome's subjects, others bought with the subjects' own tribute; a few were made free to all.

*Barbara Levick is the Ancient History Fellow at St. Hilda's College, Oxford.*